

HON. MARCY KAPTUR
Â OF OHIO
IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WEDNESDAY, JULYÂ 13, 2006

Ms. KAPTUR. Mr. Speaker, I rise tonight to discuss the need for changes at FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and how our Nation approaches disaster response in general.

I am one of the Members here that voted not to move FEMA from being an independent agency into the new Department of Homeland Security, and every day that goes by and every disaster that happens proves that was the wiser course of action. FEMA should be restored to its former status as an immediate national response, emergency response agency. It should not be buried five levels down in the Department of Homeland Security, now the second largest agency in our government after the Department of Defense. It simply is too burdensome, and the American people are suffering as a result of it. If New Orleans was not a lesson, if Katrina was not a lesson, if Rita was not a lesson, then what kind of students are we?

Today, I visited areas in my own congressional district in northern Ohio that have been declared national disaster areas now because of the flooding that occurred June 21 through June 23 in northern Ohio. Water rose as high as 6 to 7 to 8 feet, 25 homes were completely destroyed, 317 received major damage, 1,064 received minor damage and 3,262 had cosmetic damage; and that is as of just today.

The local response was rapid and top notch, the best they could do. FEMA's Federal response has been what I would term somewhat timely and not overly effective.

As I have visited with elected officials and residents affected by flooding over these last few days, outlining key Federal help that we can bring to them, I was struck by how disjointed the assistance is and how we try to help people at the local level to apply for what they are eligible for. They simply do not know.

I explained to officials and constituents that Federal assistance might cover losses not addressed with their own personal insurance and that they had to file an insurance claim form with their private insurance company before contacting FEMA. But let me tell you what they require down at the county level.

If, in Ohio, you were affected by the recent flood, they tell you, Go to the FEMA office that we have temporarily established in an adjoining county. So people from the affected county have to go to an adjoining county. When they get to the FEMA office, they are told, Oh, we can't help you fill out the application here. We can just talk to you about it. You have to go to your local library. They have to go back into their home county, go to the main library to try to get into the computer program to apply for the FEMA program.

Well, guess what? The local librarians do not work for FEMA. They do not know all the Federal assistance. I sat with one gentleman today at a computer in the library where he tried to get into his password and code that he had gotten last week, as FEMA had instructed him, and guess what? The password didn't work.

And he was a computer techie. He knew more about computers than I did. He was not a senior citizen who was not familiar with computers. We could not get into his records to find out if FEMA had even received his application from a week ago when he filed it.

What happens in Ohio is that, assuming you can file, if you can really get it done at the library, which I do not think is right, FEMA ought to have the computers right at the temporary FEMA office, then you get an envelope in the mail from the Small Business Administration. Well, nobody in my area has gotten them yet, but the average person says, Well, if I applied at FEMA, why am I getting a letter from the Small Business Administration?

The reason is because SBA will establish your income eligibility for grants, or for loans if you do not qualify for grants, and if you do not submit the SBA paperwork, you cannot get the FEMA assistance. But the average person who is scraping mud out of their living room and has had their basements totally destroyed and has had to take time off work in order to try to find a place to live, how do they have time for all of this?

Twenty-five years ago, FEMA had trailers that were under the purview of the Department of

Housing and Urban Development. They moved those trailers in. If you lived in a home that was in bad shape and had been damaged, you could go live in a trailer. They had their own generators. You could at least live there while you fixed up your other house. FEMA changed all of that back during the Reagan administration during the 1980s, and we have created a much less ready FEMA to respond to national disasters.

One of the other things that has happened is that our people, our mayors, our county commissioners, who have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars trying to help people, that have had to put personnel on overtime, that have had to use their equipment, that have had to buy fuel that isn't cheap, they have now been told by FEMA that that is not covered in the Federal assistance to local communities. All that is covered is an individual's damage.

What kind of Government of the United States is this that we cannot respond to people who are in need, whether it is in the gulf or in northern Ohio?